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## Editorial

### Comparing international approaches to safeguarding children: global lesson learning

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Child maltreatment is a complex global problem which remains difficult to study and respond to. Over the last decade we have seen considerable interest by governments globally in learning the lessons from different countries and comparing experiences as systems are adapted and refined. In turn we have begun to see a growing body of literature that has started to provide data and insight into areas such as prevalence rates and developing models of safeguarding as they emerge across an expanding range of countries (for example, Leung *et al.*, 2008; Schmid and Patel, 2016; Fang *et al.*, 2015).

The dearth of international literature comparing approaches to safeguarding children demonstrates how challenging it is to undertake research in this field and draw cross-national comparisons of models of child protection (Munro *et al.*, 2011). The difficulty has largely arisen from a lack of common definitions and inconsistency in the way in which child maltreatment is classified, reported, recorded and managed. Yet, we remain interested in this as we also know that the type of model adopted within a country can have a significant impact upon the response subsequently made to children with safeguarding needs. As developing countries look to borrow or import models from overseas, questions are raised

concerning cultural adaptation, encompassing the broader debate concerning universalism, indigenisation, the dangers of professional imperialism and the place of international child protection standards.

This special issue of *Child Abuse Review* presents a series of papers which demonstrate how different models of child protection have been developed in different countries and how the model and its implementation has implications for the treatment and protection of children. It provides examples of cross-national learning and examines the policy-making context behind child protection models and where such learning has not always had positive outcomes for children. The papers cover a range of different approaches or models of child protection. Some of the papers adopt a qualitative approach to explore aspects of their safeguarding services while others use quantitative approaches to compare responses across four countries. The papers cover accounts of child protection practice within Africa, Taiwan, Finland, Norway, UK, USA, Suriname Sweden and China. Each paper ends with a summary of the key messages for practitioners.

The first paper by Karen Walker-Simpson (2017) from the UK examines the extent to which reporting mechanisms in Africa keep children safe. It discusses the application of international child protection standards and explores some of the challenges that practitioners experience in applying these in practice. The paper explores whether these adequately address the complexities of child protection work in an African context. Walker-Simpson argues that in a culture where corruption is evident, formal reporting of child protection concerns offers no guarantee of safety and could lead to placing children at greater risk. Based upon concerns raised by local practitioners charged with implementing international standards through their work in NGOs, she advocates for a more locally-based, practical response that builds upon local expertise. The paper questions the place of international aid agencies adopting the role of 'experts' and imposing standards developed in a different context.

The second paper by Yei-Whei Lin (2017) follows on the theme of reporting and borrowing models from other countries. It represents a piece of policy analysis and describes the introduction of a mandatory reporting process in Taiwan. It provides an interesting overview

of trends in child maltreatment, demonstrating how notifications of suspected abuse and neglect have been rising. In relating to the cross-national learning theme of this issue, the paper discusses how the child protection system developed in Taiwan has been influenced by the US model and how the initial approach led to unmanageable workloads, raising questions about capacity and effectiveness. This resulted in a process of policy reform where they turned to other countries for ideas. The Taiwanese 'model' was subsequently reformed, having sought inspiration from Hong Kong and Singapore. This new approach brought with it the introduction of family welfare centres. Lin suggests that the failure of the policy regime to meet the three demands of the child protection system, namely: system input; capacity; and effectiveness, have left a workforce struggling with high turnover and low morale.

The paper by Jill Berrick and colleagues (2017) presents the findings of a cross-country comparison of child welfare systems and workers' responses to children at risk or in need of help in the USA, UK, Finland and Norway. This empirical paper compares how frontline staff in four national child welfare systems and policy contexts respond to a scenario of possible harm to children. The four countries were chosen for their different child protection systems with Norway and Finland operating a family service and child-focused system, the USA a child protection system, and England offering a model which has a hybrid system, starting from a family service perspective but heavily tilted towards child protection. The study reports back on some unexpected results and concludes how differential treatment of children and their families occurs across different countries.

The fourth paper by Inger van de Kooij and colleagues (2017) presents a study undertaken on child rearing practices in Suriname. It investigates the perceptions of corporal punishment among Creole and Maroon professionals and community members in this part of the Caribbean. It used focus group discussions with adolescent and adult community members from Creole and Maroon backgrounds as well as with professionals working with children. Most of the adults interviewed did not believe corporal punishment was inherently a form of child abuse. The paper makes an interesting contribution to this special issue as it explores how different definitions of child abuse are applied in this context and raises the

question about the absence of evidence-based programmes in the region to tackle parenting issues.

Qiao et al.'s paper (available on early view) provided a snapshot about the public attitudes to the issue of child maltreatment in China. After they analysed 3,565 relevant news reports during 2010-2015, Qiao et al. revealed that the cases which were most frequently reported had been those with serious physical harms to children. Meanwhile, the cases of sexual abuse had received increasing attention by the media, while the category of child neglect was still least mentioned. It must be noted that three high-profile cases reported by the media directly led to important changes of state policies (e.g. legislation of anti-domestic violence and administrative orders of supporting left-behind children). Qiao et al.'s research showed the key role of news media in raising public awareness and facilitating policy changes in a country with the developing system of child protection. On the other hand, it demonstrated that the Chinese concept of child maltreatment is significantly different from the western one, which mainly focuses on serious physical harms and sexual abuse cases, with the negligible attention to child neglect.

The final paper in the special issue by Noora Ellonen and colleagues (2017) follows on the theme of corporal punishment and reports on a comparative study on the use of corporal punishment and other humiliating upbringing practices in Sweden and Finland. Based on self-report by parents it compares two countries where corporal punishment has been banned since 1979 and 1984 respectively. The quantitative study compares parents' attitudes toward the use of corporal punishment and other humiliating upbringing practices across both countries, finding interesting differences. The authors speculate that the differences found may be due to differences in culture or context. That finding ends this special issue as it started, highlighting the importance of cultural context in the development and implementation of different approaches to safeguarding children.

This special issue brings to our attention issues relating to the different models of child protection that have been adopted by different countries and the complexity in the process

of adapting models to fit different cultural contexts. It questions the usefulness and validity of attempts to impose international standards (Walker-Simpson, 2017) and how different models can result in different responses to children (Berrick *et al.*, 2017). This special issue highlights how difficult cross-national studies are to conduct. It covers a wide range of topics and yet produces some common learning points for practitioners, academics and policymakers. It leaves us firstly with the view that cultural knowledge is of the utmost importance to make decisions about the transferability of models (Walker-Simpson, 2017). Secondly it seems as if governments should be aware of cultural context in child protection to ensure cultural appropriate reforms, policy and legislation (Lin, 2017; Van der Kooij, 2017) as even corporal punishment seems to be more related to culture and context, than other socio-economic factors (Ellonen, 2017). Lastly, pilot studies where a participatory action research approach is adopted could be useful (Walker-Simpson, 2017) to promote culturally acceptable child protection outcomes.

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